

## THE HAUNTING TRYST

By Jacqueline Gum

It wasn't my first affair. Not even my first affair with a married man, although this was totally unplanned. Aren't all affairs?

He stepped on my foot in a crowded elevator, turned to apologize and when our eyes met our fate was preordained. A simultaneous flush in our cheeks confirmed the supposition; our hearts fluttered precisely at the same moment.

Not surprisingly, events moved rapidly for us. I accepted his offer for lunch that very day and have no memory of the conversation; but my sense of him remains vivid. My mind's eye saw an exceptional man, savvy, bright, and articulate.

He possessed humor, and a depth of emotion that most men would be embarrassed to admit. He was dignified and carried a confidence about him that was enviable. This man was not your bar variety dilettante, he possessed intellect. He displayed unique sagacity for a man of forty-five. For me, mental prowess has always been erogenous.

Yet he carried somewhere with him, about him, an inexplicable aura of sadness, or non-fulfillment. Was it the middle age hunt for life's meaning, or was it the slow realization that happiness had become an exasperating quest?

At fifty-three, I had come to terms with that particular reality. Divorced five years, I had successfully dodged any commitment, convinced that involvement would entail the deafening sound of the other shoe dropping. I had overcome the fear of being alone and had found a certain peace within.

It was physical longing that overwhelmed me without warning as his chestnut eyes drank me unabashed. My wanting to be surrounded by him was visceral; I needed his skin to touch mine, everywhere.

In theory, my deliberately ingrained independence shielded me from need. Permanence was never discussed, never an issue.

So it was a surprise, this bond, like none other I have experienced. The shock of its impact has been so powerful, so poignant, that almost two years later, I am still gasping for air. Desolate for lack of his company, I wouldn't trade the occurrence for a happier ending. It's only the dream I find so troubling. Caught between longing for sleep and resisting slumber, I wrestle nightly.

The dream seems born from one particular afternoon just after lovemaking. Our bodies were still damp from the sweat when he pulled me to him. He was on his back, propped slightly by a pillow, his right leg gently prying mine apart, finding its way in between them, not minding my wetness against his thigh.

Rolling into him, we became seamlessly intertwined. His hand found a spot under my soggy and tousled hair as he pulled my head towards the indentation in his chest and it settled there, ostensibly home. My hand reached under his arm as my fingers curled forward across his shoulder. I can still feel his hands gentle and soothing across my back, evoking the sigh of a sated woman.

"Oh yes," he said, "that's it, you just feel so right, this just feels so right," sounding comfortable with the sense of me and pleased to have satisfied me so utterly. Absorbed in the moment, I think he was ignorant of the euphony.

I didn't want to ever leave this ethereal place where total submission is venerated, never maligned.

His face bore an unconditional contentment I perceived had been so long elusive. His half smile was not gentle. Rather, it was assured, feeling in charge of this little thing curled into him like a kitten.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and stared into mine. And I could see he'd experienced a moment of clarity, where he was able to abandon convention and exhibit affection with the sure knowledge that I got it, and I got him. I was somebody who could treasure all that he was.

Afternoon sunlight slanted across the tangled gold sheets, reminding me that this encounter, mid-day on a Wednesday, was merely an affair. Would his

feeling for me vanish walking through his own front door with a customary “honey I’m home” kiss for his wife? Could it be painless to break the connection—like the sudden loss of power when a plug is yanked from an outlet?

These past months, I’ve been visited by a dream almost nightly. At least, I think it’s a dream. I feel myself detach from my body, shoot through a web of stars marbling the sky, and into his arms. He falls asleep on a couch sometimes, for I find myself there, in his arms.

I’ve never seen any other room in his house, just this office space with a wide mahogany desk, computer monitor alive with a screensaver face of his son and bookshelves sagging with bound collections.

I float down to him and settle there, encircled in his arms, breathless at the sight and feel of him. I can never resist reaching up to touch his face and kiss his eyelids. When he starts to awaken, I hesitantly depart.

As if my spirit forced its way back into my body, I wake from this dream with a jolt; I’m in my own bed.

This vision is vivid in color and sense. I cling to each memory, afraid to forget. Lost, he’ll slip into oblivion, banished to a corner of my mind, forced to ferment in captivity. Forgetting those soft brown eyes, his resonant voice, or the smell of him would be unbearable. He exists as long as I remember.

I’ll travel again tonight, in my dreams, touching each falling star beneath me, as I slip into his arms once again. I’ll attempt to lay contented, breathe his scent, and resist the urge to swallow him. But when he begins to stir, I’ll know he can feel the weight of my head on his chest, and the flicker of my eyelash as it grazes his skin.

He remembers.  
And as long as he remembers, I exist